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ABSTRACT

Case study research, as presented here, is a way to interrelate the theory and practice of education and to improve the contributions of comparative and international research studies. This paper argues that there are four levels of concern in comparative and international education: the development and transmission of ideas about education; the sociocultural context in which education takes place; the system for organizing and disseminating educational practices; and the individual institutions where education occurs. It is asserted that the case study methodology can be valuable at all these levels of inquiry, offering comparativists a way of using analyses of each level in multi-dimensional studies. Further, it is argued that the case study helps to bridge the theory-practice gap in comparative and international education by de-emphasizing the national arena and focusing on the international and home arenas in a practical, day-to-day context. (CG)

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CASE STUDY IN COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION: AN APPROACH TO BRIDGING THE THEORY-PRACTICE GAP

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CASE STUDY IN COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION: AN APPROACH TO BRIDGING THE THEORY-PRACTICE GAP

MICHAEL CROSSLEY and ROBIN BURNS

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the potential of case study for the improvement of the contribution of comparative and international studies to the theory and practice of education.

A review of recent literature indicates that our field is in a state of flux, and this we relate to an apparent polarisation between theorists and practitioners. Further, although some theorists have shown the need for greater rigour in research designed to make a contribution to educational policy making and administration, few such studies with a direct practical impact have, as yet, been undertaken.

Our own research has used case study as a way of examining educational issues which provides a grounding in the day-to-day realities of practice but which is both based on, and attempts to contribute to, theory. While case study as a research methodology has its own limitations and critics, it is an eclectic approach in which a variety of research methods can profitably be combined and, as we attempt to show, case study provides a basis for the closer integration of theory and practice.

In this paper we argue that four dimensions or levels are the main concern of comparative and international education, although emphases have differed over time. These levels are: the development and transmission of ideas about education (the 'meta' level); the socio-cultural context in which education takes place (the 'macro' level); the system for organising and disseminating educational practices (the 'meso' level), and the individual institutions where education takes place (the 'micro' level). While much work has focussed on educational systems in their socio-cultural contexts, moves towards other dimensions are now discernible. We attempt to demonstrate that case study can be profitably utilised at all levels of inquiry, and that it offers comparativists a way of incorporating analyses of each level in multi-dimensional studies.

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Through case study we also argue that, along with other fields of study, comparativists can add to the contemporary challenge to positivistic and hermeneutic research traditions and advance the development of the critical research paradigm. Such a paradigm does not exclude the use of empirical or historical-phenomenological data, but rather integrates several approaches. This integration enables theory and practice to be interrelated so that each throws critical light upon the other.

THE NATURE OF CASE STUDY

The term case study means different things to different people - and this is often a source of confusion and misunderstanding. As Smith demonstrates, case study has long been used as a framework for research in a variety of disparate fields, including anthropology, psychology and law.[1] The case itself may also take many forms although the focus of inquiry is usually small in scale, as exemplified by the classic case histories documented in clinical psychology, or the detailed accounts of small scale societies undertaken in anthropology. Not only is case study frequently characterised by micro level research but it is also typically descriptive and qualitative in nature, relying upon direct observation and extensive field-work.

Despite its extensive and diverse lineage it is only since the late 1960s that systematic and disciplined case study has assumed prominence within mainstream educational research, and even now it is a mode of inquiry that is 'often regarded with suspicion and even hostility'.[2] Even within comparative and international education itself, where observational studies of schooling flourished for a period during the pre-history of the field,[3] and macro level 'area studies' are commonplace, ambivalent attitudes towards case study research are clearly apparent.

Underlying the reticence of educational researchers, and especially comparative educationalists, are a number of widely held assumptions about the nature of case study. Firstly, in an era still dominated by the influence of positivistic social science methods it is feared that descriptive qualitative research inherently lacks the

rigour and discipline of quantitative studies. Description is also regarded as inferior to analytical work, micro-level investigations are criticised for ignoring macro-level issues, and case study is seen to lead away from the act of comparison itself.

On the other hand a review of recent literature in comparative and international education reveals that the field 'has passed through several metamorphoses and crises of identity'[4] and today remains in a state of flux.[5] This flux can be described in a variety of ways, from the diversification of research strategies to the types of problems addressed and the theoretical interpretations invoked. In view of this it is our intention to demonstrate that many of the reservations about case study held by comparativists are based upon false assumptions, and that as a framework for research case study may help resolve at least some of the more fundamental uncertainties and insecurities currently exhibited in the field of comparative and international education.

Perhaps it should be noted at this point that we do not wish to dismiss alternative modes of comparative research or to suggest that case study is the one and only way forward for our field. Nor do we claim that the arguments presented here are immutable or that case study has no weaknesses or limitations of its own. This is an exploratory paper and we invite comment; but we do wish to emphasise that, as an approach to research, case study has much to offer our field in terms of both theory and practice.

THE THEORY-PRACTICE GAP

Present day concern with the nature of comparative research can, to some extent, be traced to recent disillusion with formal education itself. This we relate to an apparent hiatus between educational theory and practice; a hiatus that is manifest in two major forms. Firstly, despite great investment in educational reform throughout the world since the stimulus of Sputnik in the late 1950s, few significant innovations have been effectively translated into practice.[6] Secondly, attempted reforms (including those that have been implemented) are now believed to have brought little of the anticipated economic or social development, or to have generated increased social equality, either within or between nations. As Debeauvais points out:

> We are currently witnessing a reaction against notions that used to lie at the root of the theory of integrated economic and social development, and of the 'human rsources planning' practices associated with it. Two ideas underpinned these conceptions: education is a factor of economic development, and this depends on manpower skills, which are developed by the educational system.[7]

He concludes from this that 'rather than postulate a perfect match between the social order and the economic order, let us rather subject educational questions to critical re-examination ...'[8] We are now in the throes of such questioning!

Simkin, amongst others, argues that theories underlying the relationship between education and the economy reflect both national traditions in comparative research as well as an internationalism that is imperialistic in result if not in intent.[9] The outcome is an ethnocentrism in comparative education which is found in the practice of comparativists as well as in their theories. Nor is the ethnocentrism confined to the work of analysts concerned with development or developing countries. It is also found, to some extent at least, in the nation-specific styles in which comparative education in general is conceived and undertaken.[10]

While this criticism has been levelled at both theorists and practitioners, thus implying that there is a close relationship between the two, in agreement with Parkyn, we also argue that there is a tendency for the work of theorists in comparative and international education to be conducted with insufficient attention to practice - and vice versa.[11]

The term practice needs some clarification. There are two senses in which it is relevant to this paper. The first refers to research conducted for the purpose of educational decision making. Both Debeauvais[12] and Holmes[13] are particularly concerned that comparative education can and should make a contribution in this area, and the history of work within the field testifies to the commitment of others in this respect. In fact, according to Lawson, comparative education has three areas of responsibility: theory, policy and practice.[14] The second sense in which practice is interpreted here refers to education

at the 'chalkface': what happens in schools and in other educational programs, formal and non-formal, where learning takes place. It is in this sense of practice that much of the research undertaken by comparativists seems to have least relevance. As Heyman points out, it may be necessary to define the curriculum as 'the way in which the "facts" of education are constituted through people's talk and action', but most comparativists have ignored this process and have thus treated curriculum practice as a dependent variable rather than as problematic.[15] Yet it is here that education is effected, and if as Husén suggests, the study of systems and achievements has provided only general indications of what has happened in education, 'the future may well lie in individual in-depth studies of carefully defined areas'.[16] Indeed, Halls maintains that 'in the act of teaching and learning, which is the central concern of all educational systems, comparative studies could possibly find their principal justification'.[17]

CONTEXT IN COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

It is suggested that one reason for the lack of attention to practice lies in the way in which comparativists have been employed. Whether working for their own or another government, or for international agencies, it is at the system level that advice has been given. It is not merely such employment that gives rise to a system focus either; it is also the result of a form of self-definition of comparative and international education that has emerged through the attention given to the explanation of national differences in education. And this in turn, it is maintained, is one result of efforts to make comparative education a legitimate 'science', for along with other social sciences, the nation provides a convenient unit for quantitative study and for comparison.[18]

It was indeed a leap forward for comparativists to recognise that education is a sub-system which is linked to, and influenced by, other societal sub-systems. In the disenchantment following the days of optimism in education as a prime factor for social change, there has been a stronger emphasis on analysis of the effects of the other sub-systems upon education - and studies of political and economic influences have been broadened to include cultural and ideological ones.[19]

But rather than providing an opportinity to examine the constraints on educational change or the potential for its promotion in practice, most research has led even further towards macro-analysis and context defined at the national level.

Sensitivity to context in comparative and international education is vital. However, overemphasis on the macro (national) level now constitutes a problem, both for the advancement of theories which can account for educational change, and for practice which may lead to change for teachers and learners and not just the structures within which they work. To cite Halls, 'what new theories have we evolved? What new educational practices have been adopted through our studies? The answer, if we are honest, must be: very few ... Macro-conceptualizing and macro-meliorism have failed'.[20] It is almost as if comparative and international education has become the study of systems, within a national framework. It is the contention of this paper that the selection of units for analysis, and, as will be argued later, the methods used for the analysis, not only limit the theoretical development of comparative and international education, but also its usefulness to educators and their 'clients'.

Focus on the nation and its sub-systems plays down three other dimensions of education: the interplay and transfer of ideas and practices across nations, originating with supranational agencies or even individuals; the differences within a nation which seriously challenge any study based on a concept of an essentially unitary national system; and the school (or other educational institution) as a site for specific events and interactions. One reason for neglecting these dimensions may well be their complexity and the need for new frameworks to study and interpret them. In the following sections therefore, with reference to our own research, we attempt to demonstrate how case study can be profitably employed at all levels of inquiry, and how it offers comparativists a way of incorporating analyses of each level in multi-dimensional studies - without abandoning comparative analysis itself.

Thus, in summary, the four dimensions that we identify as the main concern of comparative and international studies in education are: the development and transmission of ideas about education (the 'meta' level);

the socio-cultural context including the sub-cultures, in which education takes place (the 'macro' level); the systems for organizing and disseminating educational services and practices (the 'meso' level), and the individual institutions in which education takes place (the 'micro' level).

CASE STUDY RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

Our interest in case study for comparative education had different origins, and this is reflected in the nature of our own work. One of the writers was primarily interested in theoretical issues, while the other was initially concerned with the translation of theory into practice. Over the course of time however, both became increasingly sensitised to the interdependence of theory and practice. Both also conducted independent analyses of the process of curriculum change; one in which case study was used as a vehicle to explore the potential of comparative research at the meta and macro levels; the other in which a multi-dimensional case study analysis was conducted, although emphasis was focused on the micro level.

DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION - THEORY AND PRACTICE

The study undertaken by Burns examined the ways in which ideas about education for development have been conceptualised and practised.[21] While major empahsis was given to developed countries, this was for convenience rather than exclusion. The basic question asked was: how has the idea of education for development been conceived, and what are the main factors in similarities and differences in conception and practice in different educational settings? The investigation was, in effect, a case study of a set of educational ideas, about both the content and the methods of teaching, and within that, two main approaches were taken.

The first involved a tracing of the development and change of ideas. This was undertaken through extended participation in some of the organisations and meetings, local, national and international, which over a period of ten years have been involved in the formulation of development education concepts and practice. An interview survey encompassing ten countries was also undertaken. The aim of this phase

of the research was to identify the sources of ideas - in literature (both on education and development) as well as in the experience and work of agencies at international, national and local levels, inter-governmental, governmental and non-governmental. It also examined the writings and practice of educators.

The second approach consisted of two national case studies, one in Australia and the other in Sweden, based on anthropological precepts. Briefly this necessitated learning the language (in the case of Sweden), participant observation, the identification of informants and the cross-checking of data. In each case this was done both from a base in a university department of education and from involvement in organisations concerned with education for development.

By putting material derived from the two approaches (and dimensions) together it was found that a body of ideas and experience had developed which was based on the field experiences of members of agencies and inspired by particular critical writings on development. Some reference was also made by informants to changes in educational ideas and practices, although most were vague about the particular ideas and were critical of the failure of educational systems to be more adaptive to them. In the first instance, it was in non-formal settings that the ideas were tried, and only then were attempts made to influence formal schools, through a dual approach. Attempts were made to draw attention to the need for curriculum to focus on development issues, and to do so in new pedagogical ways, and attempts were also made to influence teachers directly, to by-pass the existing structures and curriculum in order to directly incorporate the new content and processes in their day-to-day work.

Such work was found to be taking place in all the nations surveyed, and most informants pointed to similar sets of ideas as their inspiration. A cross-national and cross-cultural movement was thus discerned whose object was to change the ways in which knowledge about development and ways of transmitting that knowledge take place in a variety of educational settings. While continuing to focus on this movement, two sets of differences were identified. The first was in the interpretation of development and of ways to learn about it. This had a twofold source, in different theories of development and different educational theories.

The second was in the particular emphasis in and constraints placed on the task within specific contexts. Two major contexts were discerned. The first was the type of agency and its purposes (e.g. development assistance or mainly education, local, national or international). The second was the potential and constraints imposed within a nation, stemming from the socio-cultural and the educational systems in both their national and local expressions. These contexts were important in understanding the framework in which ideas and practices were filtered to and from the cross-national and local agency/institutional sources - but examples were found where similar ideas and processes were evident within learning situations in both agencies and school classrooms in quite different national contexts and educational systems.

More detailed work is needed in order to examine the mechanisms for generation and transmission of the concepts and practice of development education, especially at the school level. However, it is suggested that by making the similarities in concepts and practices problematic, rather than the differences, and by conceiving the research as a case study of a set of ideas about content and process, the relationships between the different levels of context can be discerned and this can contribute to a greater understanding of educational practice in the classroom. This in turn has implications for theory building.[22]

SCHOOL CENTRED INNOVATION FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

In contrast, the study conducted by Crossley addressed problems relating to the development and implementation of curriculum innovations, with special reference to the transfer of school centred innovation strategies from developed to developing countries.[23] This issue was seen to offer considerable scope - in both practical and theoretical terms - for original and necessary research, since a review of relevant literature suggests that in recent years there has been a tendency to view school based initiatives as the new panacea for curriculum development and implementation.[24] For example, school centred initiatives are now widely advocated and applied in developing countries, through the influence of Western literature, foreign advisers and international agencies such as the World Bank, Unesco and the IIEP.

More pertinently there remains a paucity of empirical research to substantiate the claims of those promoting school centred innovation (SCI), especially in the Third World context. In the words of Hargreaves:

> When one surveys the SCI literature, what is most striking is the dearth of rigorous, critical and empirically-grounded accounts of particular schemes and projects ... It is disappointing, then, that so little of the SCI literature gives any sense of the dynamics of the decision-making process and its effects on the perceptions, indeed on the motivation and morale, of those involved.[25]

The researcher therefore set out to at least contribute towards increased awareness and understanding of the potential and limitations of school centred innovation for developing countries. International trends in curriculum change strategies were first examined with reference to theoretical models of educational change currently represented in the literature.[26] In the light of research on 'barriers' to curriculum change a critique of the school centred innovation movement was then developed. Working from this barriers to change perspective a detailed case study of the curriculum change strategy adopted by the Secondary Schools Community Extension Project (SSCEP) in Papua New Guinea was conducted. The origins, nature and evolution of this project were documented and its structured school based curriculum development strategy was critically examined from both theoretical and empirical points of view. This analysis considered the environmental, historical and socio-political contexts of the innovation, but focused upon factors operating at the school level, and on data derived from a survey of project documents and obtained during a period of six months ethnographic field research in one of the project's five pilot schools.[27]

In this way a detailed portrayal and critical analysis of school based curriculum development in practice (at the micro level) was incorporated within a multi-dimensional evaluation of the SSCEP change strategy. The investigator penetrated beyond the rhetoric of SSCEP and school centred innovation by grounding the analysis in reality, and a theme central to the concerns of comparativists - the international transfer of educational innovations - was critically explored.[28]

While findings of this research are more appropriately discussed elsewhere,[29] in the context of this paper it is perhaps appropriate to underline two points. Firstly, by linking the analysis of the SSCEP model to a (positive) critique of the school centred innovation movement, the theoretical potential of the empirically grounded case study was enhanced. Secondly, the coordination of the research with the wider evaluation of SSCEP currently being undertaken by the Educational Research Unit of the University of Papua New Guinea,[30] enabled a study with direct practical relevance to be devised.

AN APPROACH TO BRIDGING THE THEORY-PRACTICE GAP?

It is the main contention of this paper that case study research frameworks hold considerable potential for the improvement of the contribution of comparative and international studies to the theory and practice of education. Case study, we maintain, can help bridge the theory-practice gap which is apparent in much of the work carried out within our field. By providing a means for the grounding of research in reality it may also assist in reducing the ubiquitous hiatus between educational policy and practice. As Stenhouse points out, by improving our understanding of 'day-to-day educational reality'[31] we can 'tutor our judgement'[32] for the betterment of educational decision-making, and for the benefit of educational practice.

Investment in such descriptive, observational research at the micro-level could also rekindle a positive interest in the history of the field, by forging links between contemporary studies and the work of the early pioneers of comparative and international education. It is salutary to note, for instance, that as early as 1808 the distinguished French professor César Auguste Basset recognised the 'usefulness of making observations in foreign countries about education and instruction', but warned that researchers' should 'judge men and things in accordance with real and established facts and not in terms of written systems or speculative plans'.[33]

On the other hand, criticism of the subjective and impressionistic nature of the reports of nineteenth century 'travelling educators' draws attention to the importance of rigour and discipline for modern case study. Indeed, while it is argued here that the potential of case study

research has yet to be fully realised within comparative and international education, it is also held that such developments should proceed along with further exploration of the weaknesses and limitations of the approach. In short, poorly conducted case study will have little positive impact upon the theory or practice of education. Case study is not the 'shallow end' of research; on the contrary it is a multi-disciplinary, eclectic and flexible approach that can validly combine qualitative and quantitative data. But, as Walker points out, case study is a mode of inquiry that makes heavy demands upon its practitioners.[34]

There is, however, a rapidly growing body of methodological literature to structure research, and comparativists as such could undoubtedly add to this given the multi-disciplinary nature of their field and their heightened awareness of the importance of context in educational research. A valuable series of case study readers has, for example, been recently produced by Deakin University[35] and writers such as Hamilton, MacDonald and Stake explore the issues of case study validity, generalizations and ethics in a University of East Anglia volume edited by Simons.[36] The fusion of such literature with that utilized by more 'traditional' ethnographers already working within our field[37] could also stimulate useful, timely and creative research.

Another aspect of the field which meta-level case study addresses is international education. While international education has a number of interpretations, two of these, the focus on the international transfer of educational ideas and the use of education for internationalising the perspectives of teachers and pupils, are incorporated in research which focusses on one set of ideas and practices as the case to be studied in detail. This sort of case study has some potential for integrating the international education literature and the practice of international education into comparative research, and at the same time de-focusses on the national difference, macro and meso levels approach while recognising the relevance of these levels in bridging the gap between ideas and their implementation in the classroom.

Thus, as we have attempted to demonstrate, the potential of case study need not be limited to the micro level as critics such as Reynolds imply.[38] Rather, we argue that the potential of micro level case study

can be enhanced by linking detailed empirically grounded research with appropriate theoretical perspectives,[39] and by locating micro studies within the broader framework of socio-political and epistemological analyses. Moreover, while, as Newman suggests,[40] observational research offers the prospect of more realistic data for comparativists; this is surely a valuable prerequisite for the art of comparison itself. To cite Parkyn, 'Sophisticated methods of processing data are to no avail if the data are poor'.[41]

CONCLUSION

Despite its weaknesses and limitations, case study research as presented here does suggest a way to interrelate the theory and 'reality' of education. It also suggests that de-focussing on the nation, both 'out' to the international arena and the ideas and practices there, as well as 'in' to the actual day-to-day activities of educational practitioners and their clients, can lead to a depiction of education and educational change processes which enables greater cross fertilization to take place between theory and practice. We have indicated that other attempts to do this are being made, within as well as outside the field of comparative and international education.

A final cue can perhaps best be taken from the work of Paulo Friere.[42] Friere's personal commitments and experience led him to identify literacy as a significant tool for the liberation of oppressed social groups. From practical experience in Brazilian adult literacy circles, he both developed a 'method' of teaching, and, reflecting upon his ideas, an integrated concept of the role of education in development. This has since been taken up internationally in the spheres of literacy, numeracy and non-formal education. Central to Friere's approach is the concept of praxis - a concept which acknowledges the interdependence of theory and practice in creative social action.

Friere's work, and that of a growing number of other critics of orthodox formal education, has implications for educational research, and, given the issues addressed in this paper, it also lends support to the plea for case study in comparative and international education presented here. In brief, through case study we maintain that comparativists can add to the contemporary challenge to positivistic and

hermeneutic research traditions, and advance the development of what is now known as the critical research paradigm. Work of this nature acknowledges the importance of the 'dialectic' between theory and practice and, to date, is most clearly expressed in the writing of Jürgen Habermas[43] and the work of the 'new' sociologists.[44]

Case study is not, however, necessarily synonomous with a new paradigm, for it can consist of what Radnitzky has called 'tacking' between paradigms in order to maximise the useful elements of each while recognising its limitations.[45] Not all comparative work can be identified with one major paradigm, from Dewey's pragmatism onwards or the writings of Holmes or King. The use of case study incorporates features of each major paradigm as well as identifying with the dialectical approach of the critical one. Recent research by Masemann, moreover, points to the potential of such developments for comparativists.[46]

If, as the analysis presented here suggests, comparative and international education is to resolve some of its present tensions by bridging the theory-practice gap, then case study is a valuable and useful tool. It opens the way for researchers to move from a vertual preoccupation with the national arena, towards both meta and micro level investigations, and it provides the means for more holistic multi-dimensional analyses. Case study also challenges the epistomological dominance of the positivist within the social sciences, and this in itself, we suggest, has the potential to further the contribution of comparative and international studies to both the theory and practice of education.

In the hope of stimulating the adventurous to pursue such work, perhaps we should end by quoting Holmes who recently noted that: 'As comparative educationalists we are in the throes of attempts to introduce paradigmatic shifts '.... And we, like Holmes 'find it quite exciting'.[47]

FOOTNOTES

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27. For further details of SSCEP as an innovation, and for preliminary findings from the school fieldwork see Crossley, M. 'Strategies of curriculum change and SSCEP in Papua New Guinea. In Welch, A.R., ed. The Politics of Educational Change. Selected proceedings of the Ninth Annual Conference of the Australian Comparative and International Education Society, University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, 1981, pp.201-210.

28. The centrality of the transfer issue in comparative studies is illustrated by the devotion of a recent special edition of Compare to the topic. See Compare 13(1), 1983.

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